

Some thoughts about free writing...

Most of what you've read so far advocates allowing students to own their writing and to feel comfortable with it. The principal argument, it seems, is that students need to feel comfortable with the whole process of writing, and that comfort means that they shouldn't have to worry about the big red pen coming in to slice up their written expression.

Such an argument informs the mission of the [National Writing Project](#). Some years ago I participated in the Fort Worth chapter of the NWP, and my mission was to visit elementary school classrooms and to give writing assignments that allowed the little tykes to express themselves without fear of editing. It was a worthwhile project because the students came to understand that there is more to writing than correct spelling and subject/verb agreement. Plus, little kids can be delightful if taken in small doses of an hour here or there during a semester.

It's likely, though, that free writing poses more problems than benefits at the secondary level for the following reasons (in no particular order):

1. At some point, students need to understand that they are writing to learn about something and not just writing to learn about expressing themselves. If a student in a biology class were able to choose what to learn in order to "own the biology," the student might not learn much and might not fully understand the range of choices. Similarly, in a writing class, students need to be ~~dragged kicking and screaming~~ coaxed into testing their boundaries of writing ability while they learn about things they perhaps didn't know they could choose.
2. Freedom is great, but it can be abused at the expense of others. Susan Jarratt writes in an essay in the book [Contending with Words](#) that if the teacher surrenders control in a student-centered classroom, that control could be assumed by some aggressive students who would be in a position to intimidate their classmates. Free writing can go uncomfortably wrong.
3. Writing assignments ought to be for some reason other than taking up class time or paper. A journal assignment that permits students to free write might not yield much investment: a bunch of inane text on what happened the day before and an attitude that writing is all about getting to the page limit. Therefore, journal writing ought to be more focused and ought to be germane to other assignments in the class. Is the class working on a research paper over some timely issue? The journal writing should be over some timely issue. Is the class reading a novel? The journal writing should address issues also addressed by that novel.

Just some things to ponder.